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A Guide to Anarcho-Syndicalism and Libertarian Socialism

Review of Tom Wetzel, *Overcoming Capitalism:
Strategy for the Working Class in the 21st Century*

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Wetzel, Tom (2022). *Overcoming Capitalism: Strategy for the Working Class in the 21st Century*. Chico CA: AK Press.

I will not evaluate Wetzel's proposals. I am not against them but neither would I endorse them—beyond the general conception of a decentralized federation of self-governing, collectivized, industries and communities. In the tradition of Errico Malatesta, I expect that different communities, regions, and countries will experiment. They will likely try out various methods of social production, distribution of goods, ways of self-government, education, social defense, techniques of federating, types of technology, and so on. They will choose what they think is best. While it is good to speculate, it is too soon to propose a specific system.

Conclusion: The Revolutionary Strategy

Tom Wetzel advocates an approach to achieve syndicalist libertarian ecosocialism. He is not necessarily opposed to individuals voting in elections or building food cooperatives, but he does not think either is a strategy for overcoming capitalism. He proposes a strategy of non-electoral independent movements and organizations, democratically organized from below, with popular participation and active engagement. The axis of these movements must be labor, because of its centrality in production and the economy. But every sector of the population which is oppressed and exploited has to be included and mobilized. A militant minority, political organizations of revolutionary libertarian socialists, committed to this strategy, needs to be organized as part of the popular mobilization. This is a strategy for revolution. Without using the label, Wetzel has produced a major work of anarchism.

References

This is an important book. Tom Wetzel presents a vision of a free, equal, and cooperative society, without classes, states, or other forms of oppression. It would be directly managed from below in all areas, including the economy and community. He refers to this program, alternately, as “revolutionary syndicalism” or “libertarian socialism.”

Traditionally “libertarian socialism” is a synonym for “anarchist-socialism” and other views similar to anarchism, such as council-communist Marxism or guild socialism. Yet, although Wetzel occasionally refers to anarchism, he does not identify his program as “anarchist” or “anarcho-syndicalist.” He had done so previously—see his essays in the Anarchist Library—but not now, for reasons he does not explain. In my opinion, this book is an exposition of revolutionary class-struggle anarchism and an expansion of anarcho-syndicalism.

The book covers many topics, mainly divided into three sections. The first analyzes how our society works (chapters 1 through 5). The second, which is the heart of the work, covers strategies for “overcoming capitalism” (chapters 6 to 10). The last considers what a new society (“libertarian ecosocialism”) could be like (chapter 11).

Class Conflict

His view of present day society is based on a class analysis. Capitalist society is divided into layers related to the production and accumulation of profit. Holding up society is primarily the working class. It produces society's goods and services through its labor “by hand and brain.” The capitalist class owns the means of production—capital—and is therefore able to squeeze a surplus—profits—out of the workers' labor. The key evil of capitalism is not so much poverty (although there is plenty of poverty) but domination. People do not get to con-

trol the social forces which rule their lives. Capitalism is an immoral system to be “overcome” and replaced.

This class analysis is influenced, at least, by classical Marxism. While I am a revolutionary anarchist-socialist, I mostly agree with Karl Marx’s analysis of how capitalism works, as does Wetzel, to a certain degree. “A major contribution of Marx to the socialist movement was his analysis of the structure and dynamics of the capitalist regime....The whole capital accumulation process is built on a framework of oppression and exploitation. Thus far, libertarian socialists generally agree with these aspects of Marx’s analysis.” (pp. 312–314)

However, Wetzel criticizes Marxism for what he regards as an overly simplistic view, its main division of society into capitalists and workers. Wetzel agrees with this, but adds a middle layer of minions which directly serves the capitalists: supervisors, managers, overseers, bureaucrats, lawyers, and other better-off professionals, in both private enterprises and public services. (This does not include “white collar” workers, such as teachers or clerks, who are part of the working class.) Others have called this the “professional-managerial class” or the “coordinator class,” but Wetzel prefers “bureaucratic control class.”

The charge, repeated by Wetzel, that Marx did not expect the rise of middle management bureaucrats under capitalism is often stated but is factually untrue. (For example, see *Capital*, vol. 3, chapter XXIII, or Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.) Wetzel uses the concept to argue that it is not enough to oppose the capitalist owning class. It is also necessary to oppose the bureaucratic control class. It is necessary to organize so that working people can directly control their own lives without a bureaucratic elite over them, telling them what to do, and exploiting them as much as do the capitalist owners. (This continues the historical insight of anarchism at least since Michael Bakunin.)

Wetzel is well aware that class conflict is not the only social division. He feels that capitalism promotes other

regulate the market, there would have to be a centralized state (Yugoslavia had a dictatorship). The workers’ councils of each enterprise might hire professional managers, as they did in Yugoslavia. These would crystallize into a “bureaucratic control” class. Over time, the system would devolve toward traditional capitalism.

For a positive program, Wetzel has been influenced by several sources, especially Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel’s program of Parecon (“Participatory Economics”). Factories, offices, and other workplaces would be managed by the workers’ involved. If the workers do not govern themselves, then some other class will govern them. Work would be reorganized so there would be an end to order-givers standing over order-takers. An ecological technology would be created. But there would not be independent, competing, enterprises. They would be federated and networked—coordinated by recallable delegates and group decisions.

In turn, communities, neighborhoods, and consumer groups would also be organized into assemblies, federated together. The two federations, community and producer, are composed of the same people but organized differently, in a “dual governance” or “bi-cameral” system. By dialogue and negotiation they would coordinate economic and political decisions. There would be many “distributive” centers of initiative and cooperation.

I will not go into detail about Wetzel’s proposed libertarian socialist economy. He does not support Kropotkin’s communist-anarchist approach, which was similar to Marx’s vision of the “final stage” of full communism, governed by “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.” Rather he proposes to motivate workers by “paying” them, usually according to the time they work—plus “allowances” for those not able yet to work. He proposes a “non-market pricing system” so goods and services may be produced according to need and availability.

of society, enforcing the interests of an exploiting minority—that is, a state. A workers’ or popular militia could replace the established police and army—so long as is necessary. A federation of communes and self-managed industries might be called a “polity” or even, he says, a “government” but it is not a state. (I would not use “government.” although Peter Kropotkin did at times.)

The “economy” of a free society would not be distinct from other aspects of society. In particular, Wetzel rejects the notion of centralized top-down economic planning. He cites the bad example of the Soviet Union, but would oppose it even under planners appointed by an elected government. Society is too complicated to be understood and managed by a small central group, no matter how brilliant they may be. A few top planners would tend to be corrupted by the power accumulated by their position. A centrally planned economy must have a centrally organized state. Instead, it is necessary for everyone to be involved in organizing, planning and decision making, at every level and in every way.

Similarly Wetzel rejects “market socialism.” This originally meant using central planning to imitate the market. By now it usually means worker-managed enterprises competing on the market. Democratically run by the workers, they would compete just like capitalist businesses except that there are no capitalists. (A system like this existed in Yugoslavia under Tito’s reign, with competing companies, socially owned, directed by their workers’ councils. For decades, it worked as well as traditional capitalism or the Stalinist system.)

Such an economy cannot be regarded as democratic, despite the workers councils in each enterprise. The overall system is “managed” by the uncontrolled marketplace, not the working people. The business cycle of booms and busts would dominate the worker’s cooperatives. Some would do well and others would do poorly, as businesses do in the U.S.A. The poorer enterprises would have to fire workers in bad times. In order to

conflicts—such as race or gender. They overlap with—and interact with—class. For example, he sees the oppression of African-Americans as having two class functions. First, most of them are in a super-exploited, impoverished, section of the working class. Capitalists make superprofits from paying them very low wages. Secondly, racism serves to divide the working class as a whole. White workers can feel superior to workers of color and refuse to work together with them for common goals—even goals which would be to their mutual benefit. (This is a major reason the U.S. does not have universal health care unlike every other industrialized/imperialist country). Therefore racism hurts white workers, even if not as much as it does People of Color.

He explains ecological disaster as being caused by capital’s drive for accumulation of profits, as expressed by “cost shifting.” The capitalists do not pay the whole cost of what they make. Side “costs” of pollution, or disturbing the world’s climate, are “paid” by the whole of society, or just by the workers—or no one at all. They are not taken out of the profits of the specific businesses and their owners.

The author discusses specific problems of U.S. and world capitalism, including its decline in the last decades. But he does not lay out the fundamental systemic weaknesses of capitalism: its instability, its business cycles, the tendency of the rate of profit to decline, its trend toward monopolization, and its trend toward stagnation. This limited analysis weakens his overall presentation.

Revolutionary Unionism and Anti-Electoralism

The basis of Wetzel’s strategy is to build a mass movement—or alliance of movements—which is organized on the same principles of the society we want to see (“prefiguration”). It

needs to be actively managed by the people involved in it, horizontally associated, and committed to the concept that an injury to one is an injury to all (solidarity). Central to this strategy are radically democratic and militant unions, moving in a revolutionary direction. They may be formed by organizing new unions in the majority of (unorganized) workplaces in the U.S. Workers may also organize themselves within the existing unions, in radically democratic groupings, counter to the unions' ruling bureaucrats.

This is distinct from a strategy of seeking to get a group of militants elected to take over the unions and run them better than the bureaucrats did, but still top down. He refers to "the two souls of unionism," the bureaucratic, centralized, top-down organization, and the solidarity-based, democratic, self-organization of the workers who really make up the union.

While emphasizing the strategic power workers have in the economy, he does not limit his approach to radical unionism. Wetzel advocates community organizing, tenant organizing, associations of African Americans, of women, of LGBTQ people, and so on. Their methods would include mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, rent strikes, general strikes, and occupations of schools and of workplaces. As such hell-raising advances, and popular struggles win gains, he hopes that people will become more enthusiastic, they will improve their class consciousness, they will be more open to ideas from revolutionaries, and they will become ready for a revolution to replace capitalism with libertarian socialism.

This approach puts him in opposition to the strategies which dominate on the left. The main left strategy is electoralism, seeking to change society through votes. (This goes back to the electoral party-building advocated by Marx.) This is the dominant approach of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the largest socialist organization in the U.S.A.

Most "electoral socialists" are for working within the Democratic Party, despite its history as the graveyard of popular

ket with other national states and international corporations, as well as internal competition among internal agencies. The workers are bought on the labor market (selling their commodity of labor power), hired to work for money wages or salaries, produce goods for sale (commodities) which are worth more than their pay, and buy back consumer goods with their money. This realizes a surplus (profit) for the rulers. Officially it had a "planned economy," but it never fulfilled its plans! And finally, after years of stagnation, it broke down and devolved into traditional capitalism. A similar process happened in China, but it kept its Communist Party dictatorship and state domination of the now openly capitalist market.

However, in practice there is little political difference between new system theories and state capitalist theories (although "state capitalism" gives a better explanation of how Soviet Russia could transform into traditional capitalism). The basic point is that Leninist-type parties in power create authoritarian, exploitative, systems.

The New Society

Wetzel's presents a program for a post-revolutionary, post-capitalist, society, after the capitalists have been expropriated and their state dismantled. He believes in a new system composed of self-managed associations and communities, organized into directly democratic councils and assemblies. They would be associated horizontally through chosen delegates. These would be from the ranks of the people, for limited periods, and recallable at any time.

A stateless society would need means for settling disputes, coordinating activities ("planning"), as well as protecting people from antisocial actors (protection is not the same as seeking revenge or punishment). But this must not be a socially-alienated bureaucratic institution which stands over the rest

wave. Instead, individuals, groups, layers, become radicalized, separately over time, as radicalization spreads through the mass of people. Syndicalists have long recognized the existence of a “militant minority” among the working class. Wetzel seeks to organize networks of militant workers (and militant community organizers, militant African-American activists, etc.). And among these to build revolutionary libertarian socialist political organizations, to be active in broader mass organizations. This has been called (awkwardly) “dual-organizationalism.”

Like the Leninist vanguard party, the libertarian socialist organization is formed to advance a program, develop its ideas, and coordinate the activities of its militants. Unlike the Leninist vanguard party, it does not aim to take power for itself, to take over mass organizations, or to rule a new state. It exists only to encourage the workers and oppressed people to organize themselves and fight for their own liberation. Naturally its internal organization must be democratic and federated, rather than the “democratic centralism” of Leninism.

Besides giving an excellent brief history of the Russian Revolution, Wetzel provides an analysis of the Stalinist social system which existed in the USSR, Eastern Europe, Maoist China, and elsewhere. He sees the “bureaucratic control class” as taking over and collectively establishing a system of exploitation of the workers and peasants. It needed an extremely authoritarian state. In my opinion this is accurate. Unfortunately he regards this as a new system of exploitation, as unlike capitalism as it is unlike feudalism. He does not name the system, but various theorists have called it “bureaucratic collectivism” or “coordinatorism.”

In my opinion, Stalinist Russia was a variant of capitalism, best called “state capitalism.” The state (composed of the bureaucratic ruling class) was an instrument of capital accumulation, the “personified agent of capital” as Marx called the bourgeoisie. It was pressured by competition on the world mar-

movements—and despite Marx’s opposition to building capitalist parties. Unlike left parties in Europe, the Democrats have never claimed to be “socialist” of any sort, but have always been pro-capitalist (and, in their earliest history, pro-slavery).

Some “democratic socialists” are critical of the Democrats—for good reasons—but advocate the formation of a new, “third,” party of the left, possibly based in the labor unions and other progressive forces. However, such a new party is only likely to be formed (by union bureaucrats, liberal Democrats, and various opportunists) if there are massive upheavals in society—formed in order to misdirect the popular upheavals back into electoral reformism.

Wetzel argues that the state is made to serve the interests of the ruling capitalist class and cannot be used to serve the working class and oppressed. Reforms may be won, for a time through elections, but not the transformation of society. And the state is likely to give reforms and benefits to the people only if pressured from below by mass struggles. New Deal benefits were won through large-scale union struggles, and civil rights legislation was won through massive African-American “civil disobedience” demonstrations as well as “riots.” Now the unions have been beaten back to a small minority of the work force, and African-American rights are under attack. Elections did not win lasting solutions.

He gives a history and analysis of the U.S. government machinery, demonstrating the severe limits built into its “democracy.” Of course, it is easier for working people and radicals to live under liberal democracy than under fascist or Stalinist totalitarianism. But even the most “democratic” of bourgeois representative democracies cannot be anything but top-down, capitalist-dominated, machines. They exist so that factions of the capitalist class can settle their differences without much bloodshed, and for keeping the people passive while believing they are “free”.

He writes, “A strategy for change that is focused on elections and political parties tends to focus on electing leaders to gain power in the State, to make gains for us....An electoralist strategy leads to the development of political machines in which mass organizations look to professional politicians and party operatives.” (p. 231)

Electoralist socialists may also engage in other activities, such as strike support work or community organizing. Wetzel is for working with them in such activities, forming united fronts where it is possible.

Two Forms of Prefigurative Politics

Wetzel also criticizes the program advocated by many anarchists which is sometimes called “dual power” or “counter institutions” and which he calls “evolutionary anarchism.” The idea is to build communities, small businesses, and local associations which are non-capitalist and non-statist. They could be consumer cooperatives, worker-managed enterprises (producer cooperatives), farmer-consumer associations, land trusts, credit unions, cooperative housing, independent progressive schools, and so on. These would expand until they overwhelmed capitalism and the state. (I call this the “kudzu strategy.”) There is nothing new about this. P.J. Proudhon, the first person to call himself an “anarchist,” proposed just such an approach. Today it is advocated, Wetzel notes, by the Libertarian Socialist Caucus of the DSA, among others.

He is not against forming food coops or worker-run companies. These can be good in themselves. But he rejects this as a strategy for overcoming capitalism. The market is even more of a capitalist institution than the state! Various sorts of cooperatives have been built and thrived under capitalism, mainly at the periphery of the economy. They are no threat to capitalism as a whole.

Coops rarely have the capital necessary to compete with the giant corporations at the heart of the system. They are dominated by the cycles of the market. And if they did become a threat, the government would step in. You may ignore the state, but it will not ignore you. If coops became dangerous to the system, they would be outlawed and crushed by the government.

Wetzel makes “a distinction between two different kinds of organizations: (a) mass organizations of struggle (such as worker unions, tenant organizations, etc. (b) organizations that manage a social resource (such as a worker cooperative, social center, child care cooperative, land trust, and so on).” (p. 214) In his view, “the syndicalist strategy of building worker-controlled unions (and other grassroots democratic organizations) that operate through rank-and-file participation and direct collective action is indeed a strategy to build counter-power.” (pp. 218-219) And to prepare for revolution.

Anti-Leninism and the Militant Minority

The heirs of Lenin have many variations of Leninism. They range from advocates of Stalinist and Maoist totalitarianism to the many varieties of Trotskyism to the libertarian-autonomous Marxism of C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya.

Wetzel focuses on Leninism as the strategy of building a top-down centralized homogeneous party, one which aims at overthrowing the capitalist state in a revolution. It would replace it with a new state, ruled by the party. The centralized party would rule the centralized state which would control the centralized economy—eventually on a world scale. That such a party, whatever its original working class democratic ideals, would end up completely authoritarian, should not be surprising.

Wetzel is aware that the population does not spontaneously become revolutionary all at once in a homogenous